

Kiosks for court forms work well, study says

System to help the uninitiated fill out minor paperwork could go statewide, agency says.

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Roberta Adams skipped the thick how-to guide on child-custody forms and sat down at a computer at the Lamoreaux Justice Center in Orange on Wednesday.

The Garden Grove woman answered a series of questions to create and print a form to file with the court.

"It's easy," said Adams, 25. "I thought I'd have all kinds of questions and have to take the forms home."

A University of California, Irvine, study released Wednesday found an interactive computer system effectively helps people fill out paperwork for restraining orders, eviction defense, small-claims cases and requests for filing-fee waivers. Not only does the system make life easier for people who can't afford a lawyer, but it also might improve efficiency in the courts because the forms, which are printed out when completed, are easy to read and are being filled out correctly, the study found.

Since the program started in 2000, more than 6,000 people have used the free system, located in public buildings throughout Orange County.

The system was developed by the Legal Aid Society of Orange County with about \$800,000 in grants. The program avoids legal jargon, offers a courthouse video tour and sticks to a fifth-grade vocabulary. Users can choose English, Spanish or Vietnamese.

Kiosks are in courthouses in Fullerton and Orange, the district attorney's family-support office, the Legal Aid Society in Santa Ana, Irvine City Hall and the San Juan Capistrano Library. The program is also available online.

Bob Cohen, executive director of Legal Aid, said the study should clear the way for expansion throughout California. Locally, a program for divorce petitions will be added this summer.

Cohen said the system proves the benefit of technology tailored to those who aren't computer-savvy. He said much of the technology now available requires Internet skills and access. Low-income people, however, have less access to computers and less experience using them.

"Our clients have to catch up, and they have to become a part of the mainstream," Cohen said.

Bonnie Hough, supervising attorney for the California Judicial Council in San Francisco, said the system in Orange County is one of the best in the nation because it is comprehensive and easy to follow.

"The way the program works is it asks you questions rather than giving you a form," Hough said. "A lot of people are just intimidated by forms, whether they're easy or not. Think of all the people that go to H&R Block for a 1040 EZ."

Family support Commissioner Salvador Sarmiento said he's noticed the quality of documents filed with help from the computer kiosks.

"A large percentage of the people that come before me do not have attorneys," Sarmiento said. "Anything that can assist them in preparation for their hearing is much appreciated."

Wendy Maloney spent nearly an hour filling out a request for a restraining order on the computer in Orange. She wore headphones to listen to instructions and also read them on the screen.

"You're going through domestic violence and you're going to be nervous with that kind of paperwork, and you want to do it right," she said.